(d) The steps taken to improve the existing phone services are given below:—

(i) Introduction of new electronic exchanges,

(ii) Phasing out of old and life expire electro-mechanical exchanges,

(iii) Introduction of optical fibre and digital microwave systems for interexchange junctions,

(iv) Computerisation of various services,

(v) Upgradation of external plant; and

(vi) Improved customer interface.

Use of Polythene Bags

382. SHRI TRILOKI NATH CHATURVEDI: Will the Minister of ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government's attention has been invited to the hazards of extensive use of polythene bags to the environment as published in the news-item Environment—Siri Siri bags that choke cities which appeared in 'The Hindustan Times' of 25th September, 1995;

(b) if so, the reaction of Government thereto;

(c) what steps Government propose to take to discharge the use of polythene in packing materials and its recycling; and

(d) the names of countries which have banned the use of polythene as packaging material and its contact with food items?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI RAJESH PILOT): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) The use of polythene bags as such is not harmful to the environment in the manner brought out in the news item under reference.

(c) There are no plans to discourage the use of polythene as a packing material or its recycling, as there is no viable and energy saving substitute for it. Polythene is an ideal material for packaging many items including food items. Polythene can be recycled with ease.

(d) Based on the information available there is no ban on use of polythene as packaging material of food items.

Exploitation of Forest Land for Diamond Mining

383. SHRI RAHASBIHARI BARIK: Will the Minister of ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are aware of the large scale exploitation of forest land for diamond mining in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh;

(b) if so, the total forest land being harnessed in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh for diamond mining;

(c) the date on which Government have approved the above two State Governments' proposals of diamond mining; and

(d) the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI RAJESH PILOT): (a) and (b) Prior approval of the Central Government is required under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 for diversion of forest land for non-forest purpose including mining of diamonds. No proposal under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 for diversion of forest land for mining of diamonds in Madhya Pradesh or Orissa is pending with the Ministry as on 31.10.1995.

(c) and (d) Do not arise.